

1. Auctions, play rehearsals and social parties

Social occasions, like social organizations, are configurations of behavior oriented about some purpose. In social organizations the purpose is usually specified as the goal of the organization (1). In social occasions, the purpose is usually specified as the main activity of the occasion. In this sense then, the pattern of purposive behavior provides the structure of the occasion or the organization. But it is obviously not the case that the structural properties of the occasion or the organization exhaust the range of possible behavior which can occur at the occasion or in the organization. While the structure of an auction specifies that the lines of communication will be between auctioneer and bidders, two bidders may engage in a conversation between themselves; and while the structure of an office specifies that the lines of communication will be between the manager and the clerks, two clerks may engage in a conversation between themselves. In both situations, these non-specified communications may have reference to the specified purpose or activity or not: the two bidders may talk about the weather or the price at which each will stop bidding and the two clerks may also talk about the weather or when each will do their respective tasks.

Ecological character and temporal patterns: Though social organizations do have an ecological character and a temporal pattern, these are rarely a focus of attention in traditional organizational analysis. In general, most social organizations are connected with specific locations, such as special buildings or rooms. But some social organizations are carried out in diverse physical locations. Some church services occur not only in churches, but also stores, tents and sometimes even private homes. Similarly, while social organizations extend over time, when the activity of the organization occurs can vary. Bureaucracies usually operate 8-5 on weekdays, churches operate primarily on Sunday mornings and some factories operate around the clock, weekdays and weekend.

Most auctions occur in auction studios, most play rehearsals occur in theaters and most social parties occur at places of residence. But none of these social occasions are rigidly bound to a specific location. When the goods to be auctioned off are not easily transported, the auction may be held where the goods are located, such as at a factory or a private estate. When a theater is unavailable or the case is small, a play rehearsal may be held in a private home or a garage. When the number of guests is very large or when a special event is planned, social parties may be held in a rented hall or at the beach.

An auction is usually a specific event which is carried on over an extended period of time. The auction is divided into a preview period, during which the goods to be auctioned off are displayed, and a bidding period, during which time the goods are sold. While the preview is usually defined by clock and calendar time, e.g. Sunday, from 10-4, the bidding is defined by action time. That is, though it is started by the clock and calendar, it is ended only when the action of auctioning off the goods is completed (although this action may be conventionally interrupted for specific lengths of time, such as from midnight until 10 the next morning.) A play rehearsal is usually part of a series of events which occurs during a specified period of clock and calendar time, such like an auction preview. But while the auction preview ends when it is scheduled to end, a rehearsal may extend beyond the scheduled time of termination.

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Social parties are like auctions in that they are specific events, and like rehearsals in that their time period is usually specified before hand, though again, social parties may extend beyond their scheduled end.

Structural properties: The structure of both occasions and organizations can be analyzed in terms of the way in which the activity of the occasion or the organization is distributed among the participants, that is, in terms of role behavior. (2) But again, while roles may be specified which are important with respect to the goals of the organization or the main activity of the occasion, this here and now identity of the participants need not exhaust the range of role behavior which can occur within the structural setting. Both office workers and guests can also behave in terms of various latent social roles, such as males and females, friends and enemies. (3)

Auctions, rehearsals and parties can all be described in terms of a general three fold division of roles: (1) The Organizer, who has the primary responsibility for seeing that the occasion comes off as the occasion that it should be (the auctioneer, the director and the host) (2) The Artisans, who engage in the work of the occasion's main activity (bidders, actors and guests) and (3) The Attendants, who take care of the technical aspects of the occasion (auction clerks, stagehands, maids). All three social occasions can also be carried on in the presence of onlookers, who are physically present, but do not take an active part in the occasion (e.g. people who wander into the auction studio, drop by the theater or children who sit on the stairs at a party.) (4) If attendants are not utilized, at auctions and social parties their tasks usually will be taken over by the organizer, while at rehearsals these tasks will be taken over by the artisans.

Auctions, rehearsals and parties vary in the degree to which the roles of organizer, artisans and attendants can overlap. In auctions and rehearsals, the only person who can carry out the organizer's tasks is that person who is originally delegated to the position. At parties, the guests may in fact take over some of the tasks of the host, such as offering drinks, introducing other guests, etc. Attendants at parties must engage in only their technical tasks, but stage hands at rehearsals may read lines for missing actors and auction clerks can be delegated as proxies for absent bidders. The organizer at parties and rehearsals may engage in the activities of the artisans: the director may have a role in the play and the host may relax and be a guest at his own party. On the other hand, the auctioneer cannot enter into the bidding.

Auctions, rehearsals and parties also differ in the degree to which the events which constitute the main activity of the occasion involve the artisans. The responsibility of bidding and sociability is not specified according to each artisan, and once the proceedings have started, individual bidders and guests can come and go during the course of events at their own discretion. On the other hand, in as much as the responsibility of various play parts is specifically delegated to individual actors, when an actor will be involved in the proceedings is not a matter of his choice.

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1. T. Parsons, "Suggestions for a Sociological Approach to the Theory of Organizations" in A. Etzioni, Complex Organizations, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1961, p. 33

2. Ibid., p. 35-36

3. A. Gouldner, "Organizational Analysis" in Merton, et al., Sociology Today, Basic Books, 1959, p. 410

4. This is similar to the role division in R. Barker & H. Wright, Midwest and Its Children, Row, Peterson & Co, 1955, p. 69

